DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 606 SP 034 830

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TITLE National Service: Implications for Teacher Education. An Issue Paper.
INSTITUTION American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Washington, D.C.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-89333-111-2
PUB DATE Oct 93
NOTE 8p.
AVAILABLE FROM American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education Publications, One Dupont Circle, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036-1186.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Compensation (Remuneration); Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Legislation; *Federal State Relationship; Higher Education; *Public Service; Quality Control; Student Loan Programs; *Teacher Education Programs; *Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS *Implicational Analysis; National and Community Service Trust Act 1993; *National Service; Volunteers in Education

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the legislative provisions of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 and identifies issues related to national service which may affect teacher education programs and their graduates. In the context of the proposal, national service is defined as domestic, civilian work in local communities, compensated with financial assistance for postsecondary education. Close examination of the proposal reveals weaknesses that could undermine the ability of programs to address unmet needs in education. The bill contains broad provisions that are intended to generate flexible and innovative service opportunities. However, the legislation devotes little attention to the quality of these assignments or the persons selected to fill them. Aspects of the national service proposal illustrating these weaknesses as they relate to teacher education are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the Student Loan Reform Act of 1993 and its operational connection to national service; the reauthorization of the National and Community Service Act of 1990; and the need for professional standards of preparation and licensure within national service programs that promote excellence in classroom teaching. (LL)

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ED 363 606

NATIONAL SERVICE:
Implications for Teacher Education

AN ISSUE PAPER BY:

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OCTOBER 1993

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AACTE Issue Papers are supported by contributions from the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education, the Association of Colleges and Schools of Education in State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges and Affiliated Private Universities, and the Teacher Education Council of State Colleges and Universities.

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Printed in the United States of America

International Standard Book Number: 0-89333-111-2

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout his campaign for the presidency of the United States, Bill Clinton often spoke about his wish that Americans would have greater opportunities and incentives to help their communities and their country through voluntary service. Following his election, President Clinton established the Office of National Service in the White House. This office, directed by Eli J. Segal, developed a proposal to encourage Americans to participate in long-term volunteer programs, by compensating them with financial assistance for postsecondary education.

In five months, that proposal—the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993—has become law. Though the provisions of the Act are substantially scaled down from Clinton's original plan, the legislation will fulfill the President's vision to promote a new spirit of volunteerism and service to address "unmet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs."[1] This briefing paper will review the Act and identify issues related to national service which may affect teacher education programs and their graduates.

DEFINING NATIONAL SERVICE

In the context of the Clinton proposal, the term "national service" represents domestic, civilian work in local communities. It aims to provide committed, enthusiastic workers to tackle social problems while offering those volunteers a sense of community, good citizenship, and personal self-esteem. "National service is a civic compact that creates new opportunities for citizens to help themselves by helping others....it seeks to revive a spirit of civic obligation that has languished."[2] Service is "one of the deepest forms of citizenship obligations and sacrifice for the good of our democratic commonwealth....today, the need to engage young people in that kind of civic enterprise is greater than ever (as it) can be a democratizing and integrating force for an increasingly balkanized nation."[3]

Several communities and states sponsor service programs of their own, to engage their citizens in addressing persistent social conditions. Usually funded by a combination of public monies and private donations, programs like Boston's City Year and PennSERVE in Pennsylvania rehabilitate housing, clean up parks, and distribute food to the needy. In addition to these civic programs, many nonprofit organizations sponsor volunteer opportunities across the nation, such as YouthBuild and Campus Compact.[4]

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 intends to build upon successful local programs by awarding competitive federal grants to sponsoring organizations, enabling them to develop designated national service jobs. The bill will amend existing law, the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-610) to provide federal support—both financial and administrative—for a system of national service.

LEGISLATIVE PROVISIONS

The key features of the National and Community Trust Act of 1993 include proposals to:

- Form a new Corporation for National and Community Service by merging existing agencies in charge of current federal volunteerism initiatives. The corporation will unite ACTION with the Commission on National and Community Service to oversee the national service program. The corporation will be headed by a 15-member Board of Directors which will set guidelines for program eligibility and oversight.

- Create state commissions to review applications from local groups and award funding to programs which meet Board criteria. Local organizations may combine the federal grants with other funds to support projects that serve the needs of the community and create jobs for national service volunteers. Sponsoring organizations will hire, train, and supervise workers in designated national service positions, who will qualify for specific benefits.

- Provide compensation to volunteers—namely, an "education benefit" of $4,725 per year of service. Volunteers will also receive health insurance, child care assistance, and subsistence wages up to $7,400 during their service term. Volunteers may serve up to two years (at 1,700 hours per year for full-time service) and take up to five years to use their education benefit for college or job-training costs.

- Reauthorize the Serve-America program to encourage the use of "service-learning" curricula in elementary and secondary schools.

The national service program is expected to generate about 20,000 slots in its first year of operation in 1994, increasing to around 100,000 participants by 1997. Congress authorized $1.5 billion for national service, alloting $300 million in FY 1994, $500 million in FY 1995 and $700 million in FY 1996. This funding is significantly less than the $7.3 billion initially requested by the Clinton Administration to fund the program over this period.

Impact On Teacher Education

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 may have a significant impact on teacher education, and the effect could be more negative than the supporters of national service envision. The bill contains broad provisions that are intended to generate flexible and innovative service opportunities. However, the legislation devotes little attention to the quality of these assignments or the persons selected to fill them. The following aspects of the national service proposal illustrate these weaknesses as they relate to teacher education.

The legislation identifies teaching as a venue for national service, but does not delineate what qualifications volunteers should have.

Section 122 of the Act identifies various types of service programs which may be eligible for funding, including "professional corps" programs that "recruit and place qualified participants in positions as teachers." [5] A "participant" in national service is defined under Section 137 as "an individual...[who] meets such eligibility requirements, directly related to the tasks to be accomplished, as may be established by the program...and has received a high school diploma or its equivalent [or agrees to obtain one]."[6] The legislation is vague about what abilities "professional corps" workers should have, nor does it clearly require that "professional corps" programs conform to any basic qualifications established by the profession itself. In the case of teaching, national service could place volunteers without education degrees or standard certification in classrooms.

Additionally, the legislation puts national service professional corps to work in "communities with an inadequate number of such professionals," making it quite probable that these corps members would serve in poorer schools with concentrations of disadvantaged children. Instruction of disadvantaged students demands appropriate preparation in pedagogy and clinical experience, yet the national service plan does not require that professional corps volunteers demonstrate proficiency in or commitment to teaching disadvantaged students.

The bill authorizes professional corps programs to place "teachers (and) early childhood development staff (in) communities with an inadequate number of such professionals," but fails to define the criteria to determine any such shortages.

The purpose of national service is to address "unmet needs," but the legislation does not describe how these needs should be identified and by whom. Presumably, "unmet needs" will be specified automatically by grant applicants seeking federal money to alleviate a perceived shortage in their community, yet it is not clear what steps the Corporation for National and Community Service or state commissions should take to substantiate or prioritize these claims.

The definition of "unmet needs" for professional-level jobs, is important, as some objective indicators are needed to distinguish between normal vacancies and genuine "unmet needs" available for national service. A recent report from the Department of Education indicates that most schools are able to hire sufficient numbers of teachers[7] from traditional employment sources: new education graduates, returning teachers, and career changers entering the field. The report noted that hiring can be difficult for certain types of schools or for particular subjects,[8] but the national service legislation does not concentrate professional corps on these problem areas. Clear guidelines on "unmet needs" are needed to focus professional corps service programs on schools with the most urgent problems.

The proposal does not assure that national service professional corps will enhance professionalism or encourage diversity in the teaching force.

The National and Community Service Trust Act creates "professional corps" in teaching and other professions without requiring that these programs uphold professional standards, or otherwise contribute positively to the field. The legislation endangers professional integrity by opening opportunities to persons with unspecified qualifications and uncertain commitment to the profession, and who may not adopt or be subject to accepted standards of best practice.

Teacher organizations strive to widen opportunities for groups underrepresented in the teaching profession. The education benefits of national service could be a powerful recruitment tool to attract minorities to teaching. National service encourages diversity among volunteers, but the legislation should contain stronger and clearer provisions to target participation in professional corps to minorities. Such language could support the profession's efforts to increase multicultural sensitivity and diversity among its workforce, and enhance career opportunities for persons of diverse backgrounds.

Additionally, the National and Community Service Trust Act ignores current law which supports improved teacher preparation. Title V of the 1992 Higher Education Act (HEA) provides programs to expand professional development for practicing teachers, promote minority recruitment, and strengthen collegiate teacher education. Title V includes authorization for the Teacher Corps program, designed to attract teachers to disadvantaged schools and encourage minority youth to pursue teaching careers. Objectives of the Teacher Corps program align with those of national service, but this program has not been funded in the FY'94 budget. Though Title V programs are authorized by Congress for $613 million in total funding, only five programs were included in the FY'94 budget.

The Act forbids the displacement of regular employees with national service volunteers, but fails to recognize how volunteers could affect competition for entry-level openings.

Though the National and Community Service Trust Act prohibits displacing regular workers with volunteers,[9] the legislation does not protect new entrants to professional jobs from competition by professional corps workers. National service participants, subsidized largely by federal dollars, might appear easier or cheaper to hire than graduates from collegiate teacher education programs. As national service grows and more participants are recruited, some entry-level positions could become the domain of national service workers and block other applicants from consideration for these jobs.

National service volunteers may be assigned to schools in positions other than teaching, yet the legislation does not indicate what role teachers will have in selecting, supervising, or dismissing these workers.

National service grants could support projects which place volunteers in non-teaching roles in schools, such as playground monitors, tutors, or aides. It is likely that such grants would be awarded to a school or school district, but the responsibility for training and supervising national service participants will fall on classroom teachers. Teachers need clear guidance on appropriate work assignments for national service employees and explicit authority to supervise them. Sponsors of school-based service projects should help teachers manage national service personnel by 1) training teachers how to supervise adult workers, and 2) having national service participants meet employment requirements set for regular school employees (such as background checks).

Related Issues

Direct Loans

Although enacted separately from the National and Community Service Trust Act, new legislation to revise college student lending is connected operationally to national service. The Student Loan Reform Act of 1993 will replace the current system of guaranteed loans (administered through banks) with loans issued directly to students through their institutions. For national service participants, direct lending will enable those who complete their service after college to apply their education benefit (up to $9,450) to forgive college loan debt.

Direct loans will offer more flexible repayment options to students, including extended terms, graduated payments, and income-contingent repayment. These options are intended to further promote the concept of "community service" by permitting borrowers to enter

lower-paying careers (such as teaching or social work) and still afford loan repayment.

K-12 Service-Learning

The National and Community Service Trust Act also reauthorizes provisions from the National and Community Service Act of 1990 which promote the use of "service-learning" curricula in K-12 schools.[10] Service-learning integrates service projects into classroom teaching, and allows students in elementary and secondary schools to help their communities while learning math, science, history, and other subjects. Titled "Serve-America," this program would award grants to partnerships of local schools, colleges, and nonprofit agencies to sponsor service-learning projects in K-12 schools and fund training for teachers and administrators in service-learning techniques.

CONCLUSION

Local programs in states and cities prove that well-organized and adequately-supported service programs can make a positive impact on communities and on the lives of those who serve. The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 is intended to spread the beneficial effects of service—fostering community involvement, promoting good citizenship, and assisting needy people—throughout the country. Yet close examination of the proposal reveals weaknesses that could undermine the ability of national service programs to address "unmet needs" in education, human services, public safety, and environmental protection.

Particularly for professional-level service programs, the National and Community Service Trust Act provides insufficient quality control in selecting projects and participants. The legislation could be more carefully structured to encourage those national service projects which truly support service-oriented occupations like teaching—primarily by respecting accepted standards of best practice set by these professions. The national service initiative should augment long-standing efforts of the teaching profession to attract energetic, caring, and diverse individuals to the nation's classrooms; it should not circumvent professional standards of preparation and licensure that promote excellence in classroom teaching.

Notes

1. U. S. Congress, House of Representatives, *The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993*, H.Rpt. 103-219, p. 7.
2. Progressive Policy Institute, *Mandate for Change*, p. 144.
3. Ibid., p. 149.
4. Commission on National and Community Service, *What You Can Do for Your Country*, p. 91+.
5. *National and Community Service Trust Act*, p. 8.
6. Ibid., p. 26.
7. U. S. Department of Education, *Schools and Staffing in the United States*, p. 110.
8. Ibid., p. 114.
9. *National and Community Service Trust Act*, p. 84.
10. Ibid., p. 77+.

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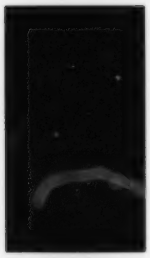

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